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AUTHOR Strickland, Karen Syvrud
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ABSTRACT

Training of teaching assistants (TAs) in the Writing Program at the University of Massachusetts is described. Training prepares TAs for the responsibility of being the primary class instructors who design the curriculum, teach, and evaluate students with minimal supervision. Training sessions consist of an orientation workshop at the beginning of the semester, regular course director meetings, and periodic workshops on selected topics. As much as possible, trainers model experiential teaching strategies by simulating the writing class, role playing, and by having TAs do writing exercises that they will use with their own students. Experienced TAs also share with first-time teachers tips on classroom management and organization. After the orientation workshop, TAs receive continued support and training through course director meetings, which address specific topics. Another part of training for TAs is to sponsor informal gatherings to develop a mutual support system for sharing and borrowing ideas. Socializing is encouraged through weekly coffee hours and lunch meetings. TAs benefit from a forum to rehearse lessons and evaluate their impact. The final component of the training program is fostering TA ownership of the course content and teaching style. (SW)

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PLANNING AND FACILITATING A GROUP WORKSHOP

Karen Syvrud Strickland
University Writing Program
University of Massachusetts
Amherst, Massachusetts

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Planning and Facilitating a Group Workshop

TA training in the Writing Program at the University of Massachusetts has evolved into a comprehensive array of activities because of our need to prepare 20-30 new TA's and support 40-50 experienced TAs for the responsibility of being the primary instructors in the class. Unlike other programs where the TA is actually an assistant to a professor, our TAs design the curriculum, teach, and evaluate their students with minimal supervision. There is no pre-planned course. When they are hired, our TAs are given course guidelines which include premises about the teaching of writing, and policies regarding attendance and grading that they are expected to follow, but these are the only absolutes in the program. Our philosophy of teaching writing is to use the student writing as a text, so new TAs don't even have a textbook to follow. Since TAs are left to build their own courses, there is a great deal of pressure on the training program to give them the necessary tools. As a consequence of the large size of the program, we spend most of the available formal training time with new TAs; though, we also organize and encourage formal and informal training activities for veteran TAs.

Our formal training sessions consist of an orientation workshop at the beginning of the semester, regular course director meetings, and periodic workshops on selected topics. Our informal activities begin with social gatherings, orchestrated office assignments, and volunteer on-going

workshops. [See program overview on page 2 of the packet]

One TA trainer said the hardest part about planning a workshop is finding the best time to do it. As you've been hearing at this conference, time is a precious commodity for graduate students. We have found that the preservice orientation workshop is the most influential in directing TAs teaching. As the semester progresses and non-teaching demands increase, it becomes almost counter-productive to force training workshops on TAs. After they have already survived weeks in the classroom, they have no driving need to discover new strategies. Also there seems no incentive for TAs to improve their teaching as their main responsiblity is to do well in their own graduate programs. As long as they can keep their students busy and appear to be meeting some minimum standards, there is no reason for TAs to devote additional time to their teaching. Our training program attempts a compromise between the program's need to have competent teachers and TAs' need to have time for their own coursework.

Attendance at the pre-service orientation is stipulated in the new-TA contracts. Veteran TAs are also invited and invariably a few attend selected sessions. The concern that TAs will resist the forced meeting, a realistic concern later in the semester, is of no importance at this point. Instead the TAs are very receptive to the material because they are worried about what they are going to teach and how they are going to do it.

We choose to conduct a 2 1/2 day workshop in the days

immediately preceding the first day of the semester. The timing is often complained about however. In an ideal world with unlimited resources, the schedule would be longer and in the middle of the summer with free time interspersed throughout the workshop so participants could reflect on the information they are bombarded with and incorporate program strategies and requirements with their own experience.

We begin planning our Fall pre-service workshop in the preceding spring. The Resource Staff and coordinator brainstorm agenda items for the inservice meeting. These include Program requirements, curriculum development and implementation strategies, and student evaluation. Once we determine our general areas, we invent strategies to present the information.[See orientation schedule and evaluation in the packet.]

The primary consideration in our planning is to model behaviors we wish to have TAs exhibit in their classes. For example, we discourage a lecture style of dissemination because what we teach, writing, is best learned by doing rather than by being told information about it. So as much as possible, we model experiential teaching strategies. We simulate the writing class; we role play; we ask TAs to do writing exercises that we encourage them to use with their own students. The value of the modeling can be seen in TAs' evaluations of the orientation when one wrote, that " section [a session of lecture] seemed too dry. Unlike other sections, it didn't teach by modeling and so seemed

less relevant, useful" and another TA wrote that a particular session "proved most valuable to me. The main reason for this is that we actually did what we expect our students to do and this is an effective way to process these aspects of the curriculum."

In addition to modelling appropriate teaching strategies for our field, the Resource Center TAs meet with new TAs over lunch without the professors and evaluative staff members present. For many TAs this session was the most popular, as one participant wrote, the brown bag lunch was the most valuable session, "Not because the other sessions were not valuable but because it gave me a chance to ask some specific questions that were really idiosyncratic and not worth asking in any of the large group sessions."

Total group participation is the second planning consideration. We try to tap into the resources of the group. Many of our new TAS may be new graduate students at our campus, but they are experienced teachers who can share with the first time teachers tips on classroom management and organization. It often seems that first time teachers are left to reinvent the wheel. Tips such as decide on rules you can live with before the class starts, stick to your rules, keep daily records, don't expect to cover all the material you prepared, don't talk to the blackboard, seem obvious to people who have been teaching for any length of time, but they are commonly surprising revelations for new teachers.

After the orientation workshop, TAs receive continued

support and training through the course director meetings. The course directors have a common agenda for the series of meetings with topics ranging from how to respond to student papers to developing criteria for grading. Some time in these meetings is also spent on sharing classroom activities. One course director often shares his failures saying he learns more from his lessons that didn't work than from those that did and he encourages his group members to share their similar experiences.

The resource center staff also contributes to the course director meetings with what we call "travelling workshops." We prepare a mini-workshop on a topic such as "How to handle the Paper Load and other Time Saving Strategies," and then one or two of us present it at meetings to which we are invited. We have a variety of mini-workshops that we can present on demand.

A third planning consideration is to allow time for TAs to get to know one another. We try formally and informally to develop a mutual support system for the sharing and borrowing of ideas so that when the workshop is over TAs have found someone they can talk to about their teaching. Now this may seem inconsequential and taken for granted but the principle grows out of the reality that graduate students often feel isolated and stranded. They can become so immersed in their lonely studies, only interacting with their undergraduate students and their own evaluating professors, that they lose perspective. Fostering informal gatherings is our way of trying to prevent this alienation.

We encourage socializing through weekly coffee hours, lunch meetings where we provide cider and cookies (good incentive to come) and a beginning of the semester picnic. To faciliate greater mingling of the new people and sharing of resources and ideas, new TAs and resource center staff share one very large office together. It gets hectic when everyone has student conferences at the same time, but the informal sharing that goes on makes it worth the occasional chaos.

The informal gathering can become the best form of training workshop possible. We had one group of five TAs who met at a volunteer Saturday morning workshop presented by a professor in our department. They so enjoyed working together that they decided to continue meeting regularly on their own and together develop a theoretically consistent syllabus. I was in this group. It was a wonderful teaching and learning experience. At the end of the semester, the program director asked for a copy of our syllabus to distribute to incoming new TAs. Unfortunately, we were not able to present him with one. Each one of us had manipulated the material of our meetings into unique syllabi. What turned out to be valuable about the semester of meeting every week to talk about our teaching was the process we went through. We did not have formally structured workshops with preselected topics. Rather in the beginning of the semester we agreed to work toward five objectives. Then we chose units that we believed could meet those objectives. Each one of us took responsiblity for designing one unit to share with

everyone else. The discussions that resulted from each of us trying to verbalize what we wanted to teach and why were intense, often heated and incredibly illuminating. We tried to reach consensus every week but as the different syllabi reveal, we frequently didn't. While we worked very hard in the beginning of the semester meeting several times for the first few weeks, by the end of the semester we were teaching well designed units that we felt some ownership of with very little additional preparation time.

This type of constructive peer support group is the best kind of teacher training workshop. Because there was no professor or evaluative person present we felt able to honestly state our teaching failures and prejudices. We had a comfortable forum to rehearse our lessons and evaluate their impact. Since we were all TAs, all in the same boat so to speak, we had special insight into the personal considerations that cropped up in our discussions. We helped each other juggle what we wanted to do with what we were able to do. Coping mechanisms were mentioned to some extent at every meeting.

Thus far I have mentioned three tenets we follow in planning our training progam: Model teaching behaviors and strategies; allow for group participation; and encourage people to learn from each other. The final tenet is to foster TA ownership of the course content. In our workshop planning we often feel like our way is the best and wish somehow that everyone would teach just the way we say. Sometimes we are tempted to say, "Well, let's

just require that everyone do such and such." Then we have to stop and remind ourselves that part of having a strong program is giving people room to develop their own teaching styles and methods. I like being a TA at the University of Massachusetts because by not handing me a syllabus and forcing me to adapt to his way, the program director implicitly says he respects my intelligence and trusts my ability. This of course puts more pressure on me than if he had handed me a canned course, but it is a much more satisfying experience because the course I create is mine. When planning our workshops we have to remember that other TAs feel the same way about creating their own courses.

Thus, in planning and facilitating group workshops our key words are model, encourage, share, support, and above all respect.